

Exodus 14: 19-31
Psalm 114
Romans 14: 1-12
St. Matthew 18: 21-35

Pentecost 16 2023.

“Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.”
Romans 14: 1a

In our second Bible readings for the past few Sundays, we’ve been reading through Paul’s Letter to the Romans. I think Paul was at the height of his skills when he wrote Romans, in the year 56 or so. There is a lot of theological thought in Romans – about grace, and the old Law, and the new Way for both foreigners and Jews... At the same time, Romans has a lot of practical wisdom... In today’s second reading, Romans 14, Paul is guiding the young congregation about their relationships with one another... their relationships with one another...

We can learn a lot about the congregation by what Paul writes in response to them... We know that the congregation was made up both of Jewish people who became Christians, and Gentiles, ethnically non-Jews, who also became Christians... Evidently, sometimes there was tension between the 2 groups within the congregation... We know that the congregation in Rome needed some guidance about marriage. We know they needed some help about how to be faithful Christians in the context of a wider pagan society; and so on...

Today, interestingly, we learn that the congregation had 2 groups – there were some people who enjoyed whatever food was put before them... I imagine that the more steak and beer and greasy french fries were put in front of them at the barbeque, the happier Group #1 would be. (They didn’t really have greasy french fries, but you get the idea.)...

In contrast, though, there was a group in the congregation who were very conscientious about what they ate. They were essentially Christian vegetarians... If kale existed in Rome, I’m sure they would have eaten kale. They were really careful about what they took into their bodies, and they felt that what they *ate* reflected their spiritual disciplines...

Guess what?... These 2 groups didn’t get along well. It appears that the steak-and-beer-type Christians thought that the vegetarians were prissy weaklings... In contrast, those who ate only vegetables likely thought that the other group were undisciplined and maybe even a bit like slobs...

There was more: One of the groups was fastidious, about observing special holy days – not only the Sabbath day of rest, but other days of solemn observance... On the other hand, the second group seemed to think that this was moving in the direction of legalism, that we are supposed to break from in our Christian lives...

So, the Roman congregation writes the apostle Paul about what to do... Because the apostles met with the Lord Jesus first-hand (and that included Paul because he understood that Jesus had summoned him personally), for the infant Church, the apostles were “the go-to people” when there were disagreements about teaching or morals. (Bishops, the spiritual successors of the apostolic ministry, are particularly responsible for holding up faith and order in God’s Church...)

Paul writes in reply to the vegetarians and the non-vegetarians; to those who observed holy days and those who did not. I believe that Paul’s reply is masterful! St. Paul doesn’t take a side in the dispute. Paul doesn’t write “the vegetarians are right” or “the non-vegetarians are right.” He doesn’t write “observe the holy days” or “*don’t* observe the holy days...” Instead, Paul pleads for freedom and tolerance for people who approach the gospel differently, over matters which in the end are minor and indifferent: “Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions...”

Then Paul addresses the “vegetables” issue:

Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgement on those who eat; for God has welcomed them...

The congregational members are not to be judgmental:

Who are you to pass judgement on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand...

Next comes the “holy days” issue:

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

This principle of tolerance about inconsequential matters has been adopted throughout the orthodox, catholic Church throughout history – that is, the universal Church, believing the core about Jesus Christ: Let’s allow one another freedom for trivial matters, while insisting on the core of the gospel...

An early modern Lutheran teacher, Rupertus Meldenius, famously said, “In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity.” Let’s give one another freedom, and maintain relationships, in relatively trivial matters...

What is most important is that we are in Jesus Christ – that is, that we become adopted sons and daughters of God through Jesus Christ... Yet, we can't belong to Jesus Christ without being associated with some Christian denomination. The Christian writer C.S. Lewis wrote that what is most important is that we are in the Christian house. But we cannot be in the house without being in one of the rooms...

It happens that St. Brice's is part of a worldwide communion, the Anglican Communion. We certainly don't claim that we are the only expression of Church. Neither do we claim that we always get it right. (Sometimes, I believe, the Church on earth has spectacularly misunderstood some precepts of the gospel...) But one of the characteristics of Anglican Christianity is that we have tried to be a "broad tent." That is, we aim to welcome a broad range of people, a variety of devotional habits, and so on. Our aim is not to contribute further to the sad historical divisions within the Church, and indeed, to seek deeper unity within the Church of God...

The old Anglican 39 Articles tried to set out some boundaries to the wide Anglican field. They address this principle in Romans 14, about generosity of spirit with one another, and not insisting that we always have to worship the same way, or interpret the Bible or tradition all in exactly the same way. Article 34:

It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, and utterly like; for at all times they have been divers, and may be changed according to the diversities of countries, times, and [people's] manners...

Article 6:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not be read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not be required of [anyone]...

The core of the gospel, revealed through the Bible as a whole, and in the united early Church, isn't open for negotiation. But other things – let's notice carefully – are *not* required. Let's be generous with one another...

The congregation in Rome, and their struggles over what to eat, and holy days, existed a very long time ago. But the principle still stands: Let's give one another freedom in minor matters. As we gather at St. Brice's, may we be generous in trivial matters; faithful to the gospel; and let us love one another to our true home, by the grace of God.

Amen.